

Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period

Treva G. Hatch

The terms *Messiah* and *Christ* are widely used today and are employed almost exclusively by Christians in reference to Jesus. Modern Christians, including Latter-day Saints, associate a litany of notions, implications, and expectations with these titles. *Messiah*, or *mashiach* in Hebrew, is synonymous with *Christ*, or *christos* in Greek, both meaning “one who is anointed” (with oil). What, however, were the deeper meanings and implications of these terms in Jesus’s day? How did Jews in the first centuries BC and AD interpret Old Testament passages regarding a messiah, and what were their expectations of a future messiah? When some of Jesus’s followers viewed him as *the* Messiah, what would they have initially expected him to accomplish? Were any figures during the New Testament period, other than Jesus, considered to be the Messiah by their followers? This chapter will address these questions with the primary goal of understanding the broad messianic context of the New Testament period and situating Jesus within it.

Origins of “Messiah”

In the first century, Jesus’s followers referred to him as “Messiah,” “Son of God,” “Son of David,” and “Son of Man”; his adjudicators also referred to him, mockingly, as “King of the Jews.”¹ Christians typically see these terms as referring to a divine being who came in human form to provide salvation to humanity. When and where did this notion of messiah

originate, and how do the titles “Son of God,” “Son of David,” “Son of Man,” and “King of the Jews” relate, if at all, to the general idea of “messiah”?

Conceptions of “messiah” among Jews in the first centuries BC and AD are rooted in the ideology of kingship of earlier Israelite eras. The primary leaders in ancient Israel, particularly priests and kings, were anointed with oil.² The Hebrew Bible is replete with references to Israelite kings being anointed, usually by prophets.³ Israelite kings were frequently called “the Lord’s anointed”—or “the Lord’s messiah” in Hebrew and “the Lord’s christ” in Greek.⁴ In the early Israelite literature that came to form a part of our Bible, the root *mšh*, meaning in its various forms “to anoint” or “anointed one,” did not seem to denote an awaited, future agent of God who would come to deliver Israel from their enemies in the end of days, or a messianic era. “Anointed ones” were simply Israel’s kings—and, during certain time periods, priests.⁵ Even one non-Israelite king, Cyrus of Persia, was called “his anointed” (Isaiah 45:1), the only explicit reference to this title in all of Isaiah.

The Israelite king was not only a messiah but a “son of God.” Surrounding Near Eastern cultures—Canaanite, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic—influenced Israelite conceptions of kingship. Ancient Near Eastern kings were thought by some to be divine—specifically to be sons of God.⁶ Old Assyrian and Egyptian kings were thought to have attained divine status at or before birth. King Piankhi of Egypt (eighth century BC), for example, stated, “I am he who was fashioned in the womb and created in the divine egg, the seed of the god being in me.”⁷ In contrast, Hittite and Canaanite kings attained godhood at death.⁸ Like their neighboring nations, early Israelite texts described the king in relation to Deity, or even as a deity himself. For example, many Near Eastern gods and kings were associated with shepherd imagery—“Good Shepherd” (Egyptian), “Noble Shepherd” (Sumerian), “Shepherd of mankind” (Hittite), and “Wise Shepherd” (Assyrian).⁹ In Israelite literature, just as God was identified as a shepherd of Israel,¹⁰ so too was the king.¹¹ The god-king rhetoric in Israelite texts seems to be most pronounced in Psalms. Both Jehovah (i.e., Yahweh) and King David will rule the sea (Psalm 89:9, 25), and the enemies of both Jehovah and David will be scattered (Psalm 89:10, 22–23). More explicitly, King David is Jehovah’s “begotten” son (Psalm 2:7), and his “firstborn” (Psalm 89:26–27), who will sit at God’s “right hand” (Psalm 110:1). The idea that Israelite kings—particularly those during the golden age of Israel’s monarchy—were both messiahs and sons of God shaped views of *the* Messiah for later Jews. But what about Israelites before the exile to Babylon—did they believe that the king was a divine being? Was a “son of God” viewed as an earthly, human figure or a supernatural being? Scholars continue to debate this question, in part because of the paucity of source material. The primary scholarly conclusions are (1) Israelite kings were viewed as divine; (2) Israel’s god-king rhetoric was not meant to be literal but was metaphorical court language; or (3) Israel’s kings were adopted into the divine fold at their coronations but were not seen as Jehovah’s literal divine sons.¹²

It seems that early Israelites during the height of the monarchy tended to describe the king in terms that suggested divinity or at least a very close association between the king and Deity. Later authors, it appears, rejected this idea, which is most apparent during the

exile and postexile, when the king's role was corrupted and less significant (Ezekiel 34).¹³ Regardless of whether Israelites viewed their kings as literal or metaphorical sons of God before the exile, later Jews interpreted the kingship passages in different ways, leading to a diversity of messianic expectations in the age of Jesus, as we will see below. As far as the association between the Messiah and the end of days, the late Joseph Fitzmyer, a Catholic priest and professor at The Catholic University of America, concluded that the "idea of [messiah] as an awaited or future anointed agent of God in the end time [was a] late development" in Israelite religion.¹⁴

Before continuing, let us briefly consider whether the Book of Mormon sheds light on the question of how Israelites before the exile understood the nature of "Messiah" and "Son of God." The word *Messiah* is used twenty-seven times, twenty-three of which are in 1–2 Nephi. *Son of God* is mentioned fifty times, primarily in Alma (twenty-three times). *Son of man* is mentioned only once, in 2 Nephi 8:12 (from Isaiah chapter 51); however, this verse refers to humans. The term *Son of David* is never used. The Book of Mormon posits the following regarding the Messiah: (1) he would be the future redeemer of humankind (1 Nephi 10:4–5; 2 Nephi 1:10; 2:6); (2) the Son of God was the Messiah (1 Nephi 10:17); (3) he would come in the fulness of time, also called the meridian of time (2 Nephi 2:26); (4) he would be slain and rise from the dead (1 Nephi 10:11; 2 Nephi 25:14). Thus, while the Book of Mormon does show that God revealed to preexilic Israelite prophets details regarding the role of Jesus as the Messiah, the extent to which these conceptions were fully understood by larger Israel is not altogether clear from preexilic source materials. Furthermore, much of the information in these verses, as well as those referring to the Son of God, was *revealed* to Lehi and Nephi and written several decades after they left Jerusalem.

A third title relevant to messiah is "Son of David." Although an "anointed one" in ancient Israel was associated with kings generally, it was primarily used in the Hebrew Bible in relation to the Davidic dynasty of the southern kingdom of Judah. In 2 Samuel 7, God, via the prophet Nathan, covenants with David that his offspring would be God's "son" (2 Samuel 7:14) and would establish an everlasting throne and kingdom (7:16). This idealized Davidic dynasty continues through the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible and intensifies when the nation is either threatened by foreign enemies or the throne is not held by a Davidic king. For example, Isaiah speaks of a future king who will have authority and who will bring endless peace to the throne and kingdom of David (Isaiah 9:6–7). Hosea prophesies that for a time Israel will be without a king but that eventually God will once again restore the Davidic line to the throne (Hosea 3:4–5; compare Amos 9:11; Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 23:5). During the exile after the Davidic king had been dethroned, Ezekiel prophesies that "David" will again be Israel's "shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23–24; compare 37:22–25).

In sum, early Israelite kings were known as messiahs, or "anointed ones," who were also "sons of God"—terms most closely associated with the Davidic dynasty. It is not entirely clear from the prophetic books whether this future, idealized Davidic kingdom would be led by an earthly king, like David and Solomon, or had expanded into a body of general expectations that included a figure who would be a divine agent of God and savior of Israel.

It seems that before the Second Temple period (ca. 200 BC–AD 70) such expectations of a divine messianic figure were not fully formed and articulated.

“Messiah” in the Second Temple Period

After Persia conquered Babylonia and King Cyrus permitted Jews to return to Judea in 538 BC, the returnees were prohibited from reestablishing an autonomous state. Jews were kingless not only during Persian rule (539–332 BC) but also during Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) domination of the region until 142 BC. During most of this four-hundred-year span there seems to be a reduced emphasis on a royal messianic figure who will restore Israel. Language once associated with Israel’s kings in times past (e.g., “anointed one” and “son of God”) seemed to be transferred to the high priest, the leading head among the Jewish people.¹⁵

In the second century BC, expectations of a king-deliverer started to expand. The major reasons include the following. First, oppression from Greek overlords intensified, culminating in the desecration of the temple (164 BC). Second, when Jewish guerrilla fighters wrested Judea and the temple away from the Greeks, the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty (142–63 BC) controlled the throne; the problem for many Jews, however, was that the Hasmoneans were not from the Davidic line. Thus, the anticipated Davidic king would not come through the Hasmonean dynasty. Third, the high priesthood was usurped and corrupted by non-Aaronide (i.e., those not descended from Aaron) wealthy aristocrats. The Jewish populace witnessed attacks on their religion and temple cult from all sides, including from within.

The morale of the young autonomous Jewish nation worsened and messianic expectations intensified when the Romans, with the help of some Jews, swept in and dethroned the Hasmonean dynasty in 63 BC. Rome eventually appointed an illegitimate (i.e., half-Jew) ruler in the region. Herod, with approval from Rome, ruled with an iron fist. According to Josephus, Herod executed numerous people that he suspected opposed him. Among these were his brother-in-law (the high priest), his mother-in-law, his second wife, three of his sons, and three hundred military leaders.¹⁶ Corruption and violence did not escape the populace, even after Herod died. On many occasions the crowds protested a perceived injustice against them. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region (ca. AD 26–36), brought into Jerusalem (and possibly into the temple complex) “Caesar’s effigies” with approval of the priestly class. When the masses discovered the busts, a “multitude” demanded that Pilate remove them.¹⁷ On another occasion, priests permitted Pilate to use funds from the temple treasury to pay for an aqueduct to Jerusalem. When a protest ensued, Pilate dispatched soldiers to disperse the crowds by threatening to kill them.¹⁸ In the face of this oppression and corruption, a more intense messianic fervor spread. In these two centuries before the ministry of Jesus, Jews experienced a widespread expectation of *the* Messiah’s appearance, who would be a Davidic king come to liberate Israel by throwing off its yoke of imperial bondage. By the time Jesus started his ministry, and in the decades after his ministry was completed, messianic expectations were high.

Perhaps the earliest passage during this time period that illustrates the shift in messianic expectations is in the book of Daniel, which many scholars believe dates to the early Second Temple period.¹⁹ Here we encounter another messianic title, the “Son of Man.” This term comes from the Hebrew *ben adam* and the Aramaic *bar enosh*, both meaning a “person” or “human being.” The plural in Hebrew *b’nei adam* typically meant “humankind.”²⁰ In chapter 7, Daniel describes seeing a vision of four great beasts, probably referring to Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Daniel then saw the Ancient of Days on his throne and another figure alongside, who defeated and judged these nations:

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14 NRSV)²¹

The figure in this passage is one *like* a son of man, meaning a divine figure who looked like a human. He will have authority and will be worshipped by all people. Note also the language tying this figure to the Davidic kingship ideal, that he will be a king whose kingdom will be everlasting. The “clouds of heaven” link this figure to the Deity, according to several passages in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 34:5; Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1). Scholars have debated the precise interpretation of this Son of Man figure in Daniel; however, it seems that he had the appearance of a human and was a divine royal figure destined to defeat Israel’s foreign enemies.

A later text, the book of 1 Enoch, dating to the late first century BC or early first century AD,²² also includes material about the Son of Man:

I saw the One to whom belongs the time before time. And his head was white like wool, and there was with him another individual, *whose face was like that of a human being*. . . . This [is the] Son of Man whom you have seen, [he] is the One who would remove the kings and the mighty ones from their comfortable seats and the strong ones from their thrones. (1 Enoch 46:1–4)

At that hour, that Son of Man was given a name, in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits, the Before-Time; even before the creation of the sun and the moon, before the creation of the stars, he was given a name in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits. . . . All those who dwell upon the earth shall fall and worship before him. . . . And he has revealed the wisdom of the Lord of the Spirits to the righteous and holy ones, for he has preserved the portion of the righteous because they have hated and despised this world of oppression (together with) all its ways of life and its habits and it is his good pleasure that they have life. . . . For they [the wicked kings and landowners] have denied the Lord of the Spirits and his Messiah. (1 Enoch 48:2–10)

Thenceforth nothing that is corruptible shall be found; for that Son of Man has appeared and has seated himself upon the throne of his glory; and all evil shall disappear from before his face. (1 Enoch 69:29)²³

We learn from these texts that expectations of a divine messianic figure had expanded in the few centuries before Jesus's ministry. The heavenly figure in Daniel who looked *like* a son of man was later called "Son of Man" in the book of 1 Enoch. According to these Jewish authors, this figure was a premortal being who was closely associated with God, would have dominion over all earthly kingdoms, would be worshipped by all people, would judge the wicked and overthrow his enemies, would establish an everlasting kingdom, and would be the "Messiah."

Alongside these Son of Man traditions is a litany of other messianic traditions in several early Jewish texts. Perhaps the most prominent theme among these texts regarding the Messiah is that he will descend from the tribe of Judah through David. Genesis 49 and Isaiah 11 served as the primary texts for this idea: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Genesis 49:10 KJV; compare JST Genesis 50:24); "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1 KJV). Many Jews during this time period interpreted these passages messianically. For example, a Genesis commentary text discovered in cave 4 at Qumran held that this future Judahite king will be the "Righteous Messiah, the Branch of David."²⁴ The *Psalms of Solomon*, a text from the mid-first century BC, harks back to 2 Samuel 7 where God promised David that his offspring will be God's son (7:14) and he will establish an everlasting throne (7:16): "See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God. . . . And their king shall be the Lord Messiah."²⁵

Another emergent messianic theme in early Jewish texts is that the Messiah would have ultimate authority and be praised by all people. In this authoritative role, the Messiah would be charged with judging the wicked and punishing Israel's enemies. Several Qumran texts, for example, posit that "heaven and earth shall listen to His Messiah,"²⁶ rulers of Israel will "sit before him,"²⁷ and others "will be handed over to the sword when the Messiah . . . comes."²⁸ In the *Psalms of Solomon* the Messiah will "lead the righteous" and "will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke"; he will "expose officials and drive out sinners."²⁹ In the *Sibylline Oracles*, another first-century-BC text, "God will send a King . . . who will stop the entire earth from evil war, killing some, imposing oaths of loyalty on others."³⁰ The expectation of a warrior messiah who will fight Israel's foreign enemies may have been justified based on Isaiah 45:1, which reads, "Thus says the Lord to *his anointed*, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to *subdue nations before him*."

It seems clear from the sources that it was during this period—the first two centuries before Jesus's ministry—that the idea of a divine agent of God who would redeem Israel became more widely accepted, or at least more apparent, among the Jewish population, although some earlier texts are foundational for such beliefs (Isaiah 9 and 32; Zechariah 14). Whatever earlier Israelites believed about the nature of the future agent of God who would destroy the wicked and redeem Israel, it is clear that by the time Jesus started his ministry many Jews had high expectations of the one they called "Messiah," "Son of God," or "Son of Man." What used to be generic terms in earlier centuries referring to kings ("messiah" and "son of God") or human beings ("son of man") were later understood as titles for one special

individual who would redeem Israel. This divine agent of God would not just be *a* messiah, but *the* Messiah.³¹

Before proceeding to discuss messiah figures during the late Second Temple period, including Jesus himself, it is useful to recap what we find in pre-Christian, Jewish texts regarding messianic expectations leading up to the ministry of Jesus. These texts present the following expectations of the Messiah among many early Jews:

- He would be a premortal, divine figure
- All people would worship him
- He would be a king
- He would reestablish the Davidic dynasty
- His kingdom would be everlasting
- He would have authority over all nations
- He would lead Israel
- He would judge the wicked and overthrow Israel's foreign enemies
- He would be associated with righteousness

Note one expectation lacking in these texts: the notion that the Messiah would be subdued, humiliated, and killed by his enemies. The one text that seemed to suggest that the Messiah would be killed is 4 Ezra: "For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. And after these years *my son the Messiah shall die*, and all who draw human breath."³² In this ambiguous text, the Messiah will not be humiliated and killed by his enemies but will die along with everyone else after four hundred years ("one thousand years" in the Arabic version). Further, this text dates to the late first century AD and may not tell us much about messianic expectations in the two centuries preceding Jesus's ministry. Some may challenge the conclusion that early Jews did not expect a suffering, defeated messiah by pointing to the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53. Perhaps the most contested verses in all of the Hebrew Bible are the following:

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:3–7 KJV)

Ancient Jewish commentators disagreed on the nature of the "servant" here in Isaiah. Some interpreted it as referring to the Messiah, others to Israel. Although Abinadi interprets Isaiah 53 as referring to Jesus (Mosiah 14:1–15:1), it seems that this messianic prophecy for Jews in the Near East was overshadowed by the many other expectations of a victorious mes-

siah in the two centuries leading up to Jesus's ministry. Thus, in pre-Christian Jewish texts of the Second Temple period the notion that the messiah was to suffer and die was virtually nonexistent.³³ In fact, when Jesus first tells the apostles that part of his mission will include suffering and dying, Peter immediately reproaches him and says, "This must never happen to you" (Matthew 16:22). We must note that Daniel 9 refers to an "anointed one" who will be "cut off and shall have nothing" (9:26), but it is ambiguous whether this passage suggests that the anointed one will be humiliated and ultimately killed. Could it be that this figure will be defeated for a time and then conquer his foes? We just do not know. What we can say is that the few passages like this in Daniel 9 are overshadowed a great deal in other early Jewish texts by a victorious messiah.

That messianic expectations for Jews near the time of Jesus generally did not include a suffering, dying messiah is crucial to understanding the events immediately following Jesus's death. One must also remember that not all Jews held a normative set of beliefs about the Messiah's divine status—whether he would be divine or mortal—nor did all Jews uniformly expect the Messiah to accomplish a specific set of tasks. The various Jewish texts predating Jesus posited a multiplicity of messianic expectations as well as ideas about the divine status of a future messiah. Daniel Boyarin, a scholar of early Jewish literature, noted the disparate messianic beliefs among early Jews:

There are many variations of traditions about this figure in the Gospels themselves and in other early Jewish texts. Some Jews had been expecting this Redeemer to be a human exalted to the state of divinity, while others were expecting a divinity to come down to earth and take on human form; some believers in Jesus believed the Christ had been born as an ordinary human and then exalted to divine status, while others believed him to have been a divinity who came down to earth. Either way, we end up with a doubled godhead and a human-divine combination as the expected Redeemer.³⁴

Messianic-Like Activity in the First Century AD

After Herod died in 4 BC, the region of Judea and Galilee appears to have experienced an increase in persons asserting kingship who at the same time may have had messianic pretensions. Prior to Herod's death, hope of a conquering messiah seemed to be idealistic; in the first century AD, however, the realization of the Messiah had become more concrete, especially in response to Roman authoritarian and militaristic governing style. Josephus detailed approximately a dozen figures in the first century alone—with many more mentioned in passing—who acted in ways that might have caused the populace to view them as possible messianic candidates. He explained that many of these figures were declared "king" by their followers, thus becoming a nuisance to Roman authorities.³⁵ The Jerusalem temple bureaucrats and the Roman officials attempted to quash any movement led by a "king," especially those who sought to wrest control of the region away from the Romans and the temple establishment.

One such figure was Judas from Sepphoris, a town in Galilee about five miles from Nazareth. In the wake of Herod's death, Judas gathered a sizable following and besieged several royal armories. He subsequently targeted others who had royal aspirations, probably because he himself had his eye on the throne.³⁶ The same year, Simon of Perea put a diadem on his head and declared himself king. With a group of followers, he proceeded to burn several royal properties, including the palace at Jericho. Roman soldiers eventually intercepted and beheaded him.³⁷ During the next few years, Athrongeus, a man known as a shepherd, declared himself king and went about killing Roman soldiers and Jewish royalists until Roman authorities captured him.³⁸

A few decades later, John the Baptist established such a large following that he was imprisoned and eventually beheaded after challenging Herod Antipas. Josephus recorded that Herod Antipas was particularly concerned that John's power and influence with the populace would lead to a rebellion. Approximately ten years after John the Baptist's death, another figure gained a large following among the Samaritans, a people closely related to the Jews, both ideologically and geographically. Samaritans awaited a figure like Moses who would restore the ancient temple. This Samaritan prophet promised to show his followers the holy vessels that Moses supposedly buried on Mount Gerizim. Pilate and his infantry attacked the group, killing some and arresting others.³⁹ Roughly a decade later, a prophet, Theudas, who was alleged to have performed miracles, led a group to the Jordan River. He had promised to divide the waters as did Joshua. Before the group arrived at the river, Roman authorities attacked them, killing many and beheading Theudas.⁴⁰ At this same time, a Judas from Gamala in Galilee gathered a group and revolted against Rome in order to establish national independence. The group eventually perished, according to Acts 5:37; Josephus did not explain Judas's fate, but we learn that two of his sons were crucified during Tiberius Alexander's tenure (AD 46–48) in consequence of the rebellion. Judas's other son, Menahem, also had kingly aspirations like his father.⁴¹

A few years later, an unnamed Egyptian prophet gathered a large group on the Mount of Olives. He claimed that Jerusalem's walls would fall on his command, allowing the multitude to enter the city. The Roman authorities rushed to the Mount of Olives and killed or arrested over six hundred people.⁴² The prophet escaped and never appeared in Jerusalem again; however, when the apostle Paul made his last trip to Jerusalem a short time later, Roman authorities mistook him for the Egyptian prophet: "You are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" (Acts 21:38). This prophet seemed to be motivated by the messianic prophecies in Zechariah 14 that speak of a divine warrior figure who would descend from heaven and stand on the Mount of Olives before entering Jerusalem. The goal of this divine figure would be to overthrow the foreign enemies of Israel.

Another figure who challenged the authorities in Jerusalem was Jesus ben Ananias. In AD 62 he went about in the temple complex during the Feast of Tabernacles (i.e., Sukkoth) proclaiming judgment upon Jerusalem. His shouts included direct quotations from Jeremiah 7, precisely the same block of scripture that Jesus of Nazareth used when he accused

priests of turning the temple into a “den of robbers” (Jeremiah 7:11). Like Jesus of Nazareth, this Jesus was arrested by Roman authorities and whipped until his flesh wore away, exposing his bones.⁴³ A few years later, Menahem, son of the aforementioned Judas of Gamala, entered Jerusalem as a “king” wearing royal garb. With an armed group, he managed to kill the high priest and then occupy the Roman barracks. He was eventually captured, dragged into a public space, and tortured to death.⁴⁴ Within a few years of Menahem’s defeat, two other figures from near Galilee—John of Gischala and Simon bar Giora (rivals of one another)—attempted to take control of Jerusalem and reign as king. John was eventually caught and imprisoned for life, and Simon was carried off to Rome, where he was executed.⁴⁵

The actions of these individuals illustrate the tension between popular figures asserting some kind of kingship, with perhaps messianic overtones, and Roman authorities.⁴⁶ A few observations from these twelve cases provide some context for Jesus’s ministry. First, Galilee was the locale of several first-century-AD figures who not only promoted themselves as “king” but could have also potentially had messianic pretensions. However, it needs to be pointed out that our primary source, Josephus, who details all these stories, never alleges that any one of these individuals, nor their followers, ever explicitly assumed the title of “Messiah” or “Christ,” or received the title from their followers—Jesus, on the other hand, is the only person ever mentioned in Josephus where both he and his followers adopted the titles “Messiah” and “Christ.”⁴⁷ Second, a number of these figures seemed to gain support from segments within the Jewish populace and were met with punishment by Roman soldiers.⁴⁸

First-Century Figures with Monarchic, and Possibly Messianic, Aspirations

- Judas of Sepphoris (4 BC)
- Simon of Perea (4 BC)
- Athrongeus the Shepherd (4–2 BC)
- Samaritan Prophet (AD 35)
- Theudas (AD 45)
- Judas of Gamala (40s AD)
- Unnamed Egyptian (50s AD)
- Jesus ben Ananias (AD 62)
- Menahem of Gamala (AD 66)
- John of Gischala (late 60s AD)
- Simon bar Giora (late 60s AD)

Jesus as a Messianic Candidate

How did Jesus compare to the messianic expectations of the first centuries BC and AD? Did Jesus’s lukewarm followers see him as the Messiah? Did even his closest followers, his disciples, uniformly recognize him as the Messiah? If so, did they refer to him as such? By the time the Gospel writers were putting pen to paper, so to speak, they had already established

in their minds the fact that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, and their written accounts were an attempt to demonstrate this truth to others.

During Jesus's ministry, his role as the Messiah was not always clear-cut for his followers; there seemed to be some ambiguity at times. Perhaps a reason for this confusion was that Jesus sometimes seemed to avoid the term *Messiah* or *Christ*. In fact, Jesus infrequently referred to himself as such, except on occasion. For example, the singular occasion when Jesus acknowledged outright that he was the Messiah to someone outside his close circle was to the Samaritan woman. When Jesus spoke with her alone about salvation, she claimed she was waiting for the Messiah and that he would reveal such things when he came. Jesus replied, "I am he" (John 4:26). Later, when another nonapostle, the high priest, asked Jesus in private whether he was the Messiah, Jesus acknowledged that he was, according to the Gospel of Mark (14:61). However, his response in Matthew and Luke is more ambiguous. In Matthew, Jesus responded, "You have said so" (26:64); in other words, "that is your way of putting it."⁴⁹ In Luke, Jesus responded, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer" (22:67–68).

Jesus was more forthright with some of his closest disciples, but even in those cases he either hedged or told them to keep quiet. When Nathanael first met Jesus he said, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (i.e., the Messiah). Jesus responded, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these" (John 1:49–50). Again, Jesus hesitated to just say, "Yes, I'm the Messiah." At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his closest disciples about his reputation—how people talked about him. They answered that some thought he was Elijah or a prophet. Jesus then asked his disciples what they thought of him, to which Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Jesus then "sternly ordered" them (*epitimēsas* in Greek, also meaning "rebuke") not to tell anyone about his messiahship (Mark 8:28–30; Luke 9:19–21; Matthew 16:13–20). Perhaps Jesus refrained from referring to himself directly as "Messiah" in public because of the baggage it had accumulated over the centuries, as illustrated previously. Note that when one group in Galilee attempted to make Jesus their "king," he fled alone into the hills (John 6:15). It seems that Jesus, according to the New Testament, preferred "Son of Man" as a self-designation.

The accounts detailing the last week of Jesus's life and the immediate aftermath of his death are illustrative for understanding messianic expectations both of the first century broadly and of Jesus's messiahship specifically. When Jesus entered the vicinity of Jerusalem at the end of his ministry, he went first to the Mount of Olives. By the first century, the Mount of Olives was firmly entrenched within Jewish messianic lore. His first act after arriving on the mount, according to the Synoptic Gospels, was obtaining a donkey.⁵⁰ This deliberate act was meant to highlight Jesus's messiahship. Note that Matthew 21 quotes Zechariah 9: "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:5; compare John 12:15). The keyword here is *king*. The notion that the Messiah would come riding on a donkey reflects earlier Israelite precedent. For example, according to Genesis 49:10–11, the future ruler of the tribe of Judah will bind "his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the

choice vine.” Israel’s kings, David and Solomon, rode donkeys on the Mount of Olives in relation to their roles as king (2 Samuel 16:1–2); Solomon rode his down the Kidron Valley, at the base of the Mount of Olives, where he was anointed king over Israel (1 Kings 1:32–37). King Solomon’s royal procession was accompanied by people shouting, “Long live King Solomon!” (1 Kings 1:39). Similarly, Jesus’s followers held a procession for him as he rode the donkey from the Mount of Olives to the east gate of Jerusalem (Matthew 21:2–9; Mark 11:1–10; Luke 19:29–44; John 12:12–19) while they shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is the son of David. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”⁵¹ Jesus and his followers undoubtedly had messianic expectations in mind.

Jesus’s procession from the Mount of Olives to the east gate of Jerusalem was deliberate, based on passages in Ezekiel and Zechariah. According to these texts, a messianic figure will descend from heaven to the summit of the Mount of Olives and then enter Jerusalem (Ezekiel 43:1–5; Zechariah 14). Once Jesus entered Jerusalem via the east gate, he cleansed the temple as prescribed in Zechariah (14:21). Jesus’s activities are similar to the three-part structure in Zechariah 14, referring to the future divine messianic figure: (1) he arrives on the Mount of Olives, (2) he pronounces judgment on Israel, and (3) he enters Jerusalem and cleanses the temple. Thus, Zechariah 14 served as a type of guide to Jesus’s messianic activity on the Mount of Olives. Cleansing the temple was an act of rebellion that set Jesus on a collision course with the temple establishment and Roman authorities, who saw him, like other messianic figures of the first century, as a rabble-rousing messiah aspirant who must be silenced and punished.

Jesus also pronounced judgment upon Jerusalem multiple times during the last week of his ministry. While on the Mount of Olives, he said to Jerusalem, “The days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another” (Luke 19:43–44). He also cursed a fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25), which, according to earlier Israelite texts was a symbol of Judah and Israel (Micah 7:1–6; Jeremiah 8:13).⁵² Thus Jesus’s cursing of the fig tree on the Mount of Olives near Bethpage, meaning “house of unripe figs,” was a pronouncement of judgment upon Jerusalem and Israel.⁵³ A third pronouncement was embedded in Jesus’s so-called Olivet Discourse on the Mount of Olives—a discourse that included prophecies of the temple’s destruction, wars, famines, persecution, desolation, the coming of the Son of Man, and parables of judgment (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–37; compare Joseph Smith—Matthew). Finally, while at the temple complex, Jesus pronounced judgment upon Jerusalem and dared to prophesy of the temple’s destruction in the presence of temple priests (Mark 11:15–18; 12:1–12; 14:56–59; John 2:19).

Jesus’s activities during the few days leading up to his arrest demonstrate that he satisfied several expectations of a messiah prescribed in Jewish texts in the two centuries before Jesus’s ministry. Jesus was viewed by his followers as the divine figure in Zechariah 14, people worshipped him as he entered Jerusalem, they referred to him as king and Son of David, he pronounced judgment upon Israel, and his activities suggested his status of judge and new

leader of Israel. Like many of his contemporary messianic figures introduced previously, Jesus was arrested, mocked, and punished by the authorities for being a messiah, or the “king of the Jews” (Mark 15:26).

Because Jesus was killed by his enemies, which was not a widespread messianic expectation in the early first century AD, some Jews who thought he might be the Messiah would have abandoned such hope after the Crucifixion, including perhaps some of Jesus’s close followers. For example, two nonapostle followers of Jesus were “sad” as they walked to Emmaus after Jesus’s execution. They mentioned to the disguised Jesus that he was a great “prophet” who had just been killed, adding, “But we had *hoped* that he was the one *to redeem Israel*” (Luke 24:21, emphasis added; see verses 13–20). Even after the resurrected Jesus met with his apostles in Galilee, some still “doubted” (Matthew 28:16–20), most likely concerning Jesus’s role as the Messiah in relation to their previous messianic expectations. Some of Jesus’s actions, particularly near the end of his ministry, suggested to many within his larger Galilean circle that he may be the Messiah. While Jesus’s messiahship would eventually become obvious to his disciples at some point after his resurrection, it was not always as clear to his followers during his actual ministry. When Jesus was arrested, humiliated, tortured, and killed by the authorities, it seemingly shattered messianic hopes for some of Jesus’s followers. However, after his resurrection and additional time with the apostles, wherein he further instructed them (Acts 1:1–3), the belief that he was indeed the Messiah became much clearer. Following the Resurrection, Peter began to preach the notion that Jesus was the Messiah and that he suffered and died on account of salvation (Acts 2:14–26; 3:11–26; 4:1–22). Likewise, the letters of the apostle Paul, which were written within a few decades of the Resurrection (ca. AD 45–65), are replete with references to Jesus being the Messiah/Christ who suffered death and was resurrected. However, it is also clear from these same letters that the idea of a suffering, crucified messiah, notwithstanding the resurrection, was still “a stumblingblock” (1 Corinthians 1:23 KJV) to Jews since it was quite different from commonly held notions at the time.



Trevan G. Hatch is the ancient scripture, religious studies, and philosophy specialist in the library at Brigham Young University.

Further Reading

- Collins, Adela Yarbro, and John J. Collins. *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. This source is a bit denser than the Fitzmyer source, but it is not a burden to read. Unlike the Fitzmyer source, the authors include a conclusion section at the end of each chapter to keep the reader on track. They also dedicate significant space to explaining other terms associated with *Messiah*, including *Son of Man* and *Son of God*.
- De Jonge, Marinus. “Messiah.” In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, edited by David Noel Freedman, 777–88. New York: Doubleday, 1992. This source provides an authoritative but brief treatment of the Messiah in the Old Testament, early Jewish literature, and early Christian literature.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The One Who Is to Come*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. Fitzmyer's volume is an academic yet accessible source for examining the notions of "Messiah" in Jewish antiquity. The book walks the reader through the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, early Jewish writings, and the New Testament. In some key places, he slows down to spend time on significant developments or texts, like the book of Daniel.

Lucass, Shirley. *The Concept of the Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. This volume is the most recent of these sources. The layout is similar to the others, but Lucass positions her ideas in relation to authors that wrote before her. Thus, one can get a feel for earlier ideas and scholarship by reading this book.

Notes

1. The Gospels and Acts use *Messiah* sixty-three times, *Son of God* twenty-eight times, *Son of Man* eighty-four times, and *King of the Jews* seventeen times.
2. Exodus 28:41; 30:30; 40:13; Leviticus 7:35; 16:32; Numbers 3:3; 35:25. The Old Testament provides only one example of a prophet being anointed—the case of Elijah being commanded to anoint Elisha (1 Kings 19:15–16; compare 2 Kings 9:1–3, 6, 12).
3. 1 Samuel 9:9, 16; 10:1; 15:1, 17; 16:1–3, 12–13; 2 Samuel 12:7; 22:51; 23:1; 1 Kings 1:34, 39, 45; 19:15–16; 2 Kings 9:1–3, 6, 12; 25:4–6.
4. 1 Samuel 16:6; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Samuel 1:14, 16; 19:21; Psalm 2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 28:8; 89:39, 51; 132:10.
5. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 8–25.
6. Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–10.
7. Cited in Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 42.
8. Shirley Lucass, *The Concept of the Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 45–47.
9. See Jeffery Jay Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 39; Andrew C. Cohen, *Death Rituals: Ideology and the Development of Early Mesopotamian Kingship* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 123; Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20; and Sennacherib Prism, column 1, line 3, translation at <http://www.kchanson.com/ANCDOS/meso/sennprism1.html>.
10. Genesis 49:24; Psalm 23:1–4; 28:9; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Ezekiel 34:11–31.
11. 2 Samuel 5:2; 7:7–8; 1 Kings 22:17; Psalm 78:70–71; Ezekiel 34:1–10.
12. For the various arguments, see Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 1–25.
13. Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 10–47; Lucass, *Concept of Messiah*, 66–121.
14. Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 8.
15. Lucass, *Concept of Messiah*, 122–43.
16. Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.50–56, 222–236, 247–251, 365–372; 16.392–394.
17. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.55–57.
18. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:60.
19. It is believed, according to some scholars, that the book of Daniel was produced in the early second century BC, simultaneous with Greek persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175–164 BC). See, for example, John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1–38; Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Daniel (Book and Person, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament)," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 6:86–94.
20. Ezekiel, for example, is addressed as "son of man" nearly one hundred times in the book of Ezekiel.

21. Throughout I use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for the biblical quotations except as otherwise indicated.
22. Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 87.
23. E. Isaac, "1 Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:34–36, 49.
24. 4Q252 5.1–4, translation from Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 355.
25. Psalms of Solomon 17:21, 32, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:667.
26. 4Q521 frags 2 + 4 ii 1, translation from Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 531.
27. 1QSa 2.14–15, translation from Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 140.
28. CD 19.10–11, translation from Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 59.
29. Psalms of Solomon 17:26–36, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:667–68.
30. Sibylline Oracles 3:652–54.
31. This is similar to how we use the term *prophet* today. Although there are many prophets, when "the Prophet" is used, most assume reference to either Joseph Smith Jr. or the current President of the Church.
32. 4 Ezra 7:28–30, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:537; emphasis added.
33. Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*; Lucass, *Concept of Messiah*; and Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*.
34. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 34.
35. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.8.
36. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.5; *Jewish War*, 2.4.1.
37. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.6; *Jewish War*, 2.4.2.
38. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.7; *Jewish War*, 2.4.3.
39. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.4.1.
40. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.5.1; Acts 5:36.
41. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.1.
42. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.8.6.
43. Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.5.3.
44. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.17.8–10.
45. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.19.2; 2.20.6; 2.21.1; 4.6.1; 4.7.1; 4.9.4–5; 6.9.4; 7.1.2; 7.2.2; 7.5.3–6.
46. For a more detailed treatment of popular prophet and messiah figures in the first century, see Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 431–43; and Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2007), 88–187.
47. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63; 20.200.
48. Thus, Jesus's actions as a prophet and messianic candidate would not have alienated him from the Jewish populace as much as Christian commentators have claimed for two millennia in an attempt to demonize Jews; rather, Jesus would have encountered opposition *primarily* from Roman authorities and Roman-sympathizing Jewish temple bureaucrats.
49. Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 138.
50. Jesus's first act according to the Gospel of John was raising Lazarus (John 11).
51. See Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9–10; Luke 19:37–38.
52. William Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-Critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-Tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1980), 132–56, 176–204.
53. The account in Matthew agrees in part with both Luke and Mark. Like Luke, Matthew positions Jesus's procession into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple on the same day. Like Mark, Matthew contains the curse of the fig tree, but only after Jesus cleanses the temple, whereas Mark has Jesus cursing the tree before the cleansing of the temple.